

VZCZCXRO4988

RR RUEHBZ RUEHDU RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHRN RUEHTRO

DE RUEHLC #0038/01 0261100

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

R 261100Z JAN 09

FM AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0876

INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000038

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/25/2019

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL SENV SOCI GB

SUBJECT: GABON: ACTIVISTS SAY GOVERNMENT TRUMPED UP CHARGES AGAINST THEM

REF: A. LIBREVILLE 0016

¶B. 08 LIBREVILLE 0574

Classified By: DCM Nathan Holt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) The Ambassador met January 16 with two Gabonese NGO leaders under investigation for an alleged plot to undermine state security. Marc Ona and Georges Mpaga, arrested on New Year's Eve, were released January 12 but are still subject to a lengthy investigation and trial. Neither is free to travel outside Gabon. Both said the charges against them were ludicrous, the handiwork of Minister of Defense Ali Bongo (the president's son) and other senior officials. They also claimed that prison conditions are terrible, a contention borne out by an apparently unrelated prison riot that occurred shortly after their release and left three people dead (septel). The Ambassador told the two leaders that we are concerned about this case and have urged the government to guarantee their physical safety, carry out a transparent investigation and, if warranted, a fair and speedy trial. We assured the NGO leaders that we would continue to speak out privately and publicly about the important role of NGOs and civil society in any democracy. The Ambassador did so most recently at a well-attended January 20 reception marking Martin Luther King's birthday and the peaceful democratic transition of executive power in the United States. End Summary.

"Ridiculous" Charges

¶12. (C) Newly released detainees Marc Ona and George Mpaga told the Ambassador January 16 that the charges against them are "ridiculous". Accused by Gabon's interior minister of plotting to destabilize the nation at the behest of foreign organizations, Ona scoffed. "Our work is not intended to take power," he claimed. "We are not people who want to be ministers."

¶13. (C) But the government claims to have proof, the Ambassador pressed. Had they not, as the government asserts, accepted foreign funds for illegal or at least questionable purposes? "Honestly, the minister can't present any evidence," Ona replied. "If he could he would go on television and say, 'here's the check.'" Ona also said that government agents, including Minister of Interior Andre Mba Obame, had at different times claimed that expatriate volunteers working with Ona's Brainforest NGO were "mercenaries". Government agents had also trailed Brainforest workers in the interior of Gabon, Ona said, "suspecting that we have hidden arms" and accusing the organization of inspiring the minority Baka or Pygmie population to revolt.

¶14. (C) The charges are serious, the activists emphasized,

and they face the prospect of a lengthy judicial inquest and possible trial. In the meantime, neither is free to travel outside Gabon--though both have been able to retain their passports. "If we must go back to prison we will go back," Ona said. And even outside of prison "we know we are in permanent danger." Ona said that his wife "gets menacing phone calls at night," and that while he is strong, she is "fragile". Mpaga also reported suspicious phone calls and difficulties for his family.

Who's Behind It and Why

¶15. (C) NGOs are targeted because they have independent external sources of funding, Ona claimed. "We are the only free organizations in this society," Mpaga argued. "The others have all been bought." Although the activists remain puzzled over which of their specific activities led to the arrests, both blame Minister of Defense Ali Bongo and his political ally, Minister of Interior Andre Mba Obame for the crackdown.

¶16. (C) Anti-corruption organizations must be free to complain about corruption, Ona emphasized. As a civil society representative on the national committee for the implementation of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) he must do more than simply "issue reports." He must also comment on the conditions that give rise to corruption and the systems that permit it to flourish.

LIBREVILLE 00000038 002 OF 002

¶17. (C) Ona nevertheless admitted that just before his arrest, he and his allies were planning a press conference in Libreville to distribute a hard-hitting "open letter" drafted by France-based antigovernment activist Bruno Ben-Moubamba. The letter details many instances of alleged corruption by President El Hadjj Omar Bongo Ondimba and his family and demands "accountability" from the president for 40 years of misrule. Gabon is a mockery in French-speaking Africa, the letter continues, and Gabonese citizens are no longer willing to live a condition of fear and lies. Having treated Gabon as his personal property, President Bongo now wishes to impose one of his "descendants", an "eminent member" of the system Bongo created, as successor. Minister of Defense Ali Bongo now has a senior post in the ruling Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), the letter continues, where he is able to make preparations in the case of a vacancy of state power. The recent reshuffle of Gabon's military leadership (Ref. B) provide final evidence that the president's descendants had seized all levers of "economic, military and political" power. The government's crackdown, Ona said, had only drawn more attention to the open letter, which is widely accessible through internet.

Deplorable Prison Conditions

¶18. (C) Ona and Mpaga said they had been held in deplorable conditions during their 13 days of incarceration. They were not singled out for harsh treatment, they said; rather all prisoners face the same difficulties. Cells were filthy and crowded, they said, and prisoners had to rely on family members for mattresses, necessary medicines and supplemental food. Beatings, rapes and pedophilia are common in Gabonese prisons and jails, they claimed. Many prisoners languish for years awaiting trial. Ona said he hoped to start a new NGO to press for amelioration of prison conditions. Shortly after their release, an uprising at Libreville's Central Prison left three prisoners dead (septel).

Embassy Response

¶19. (C) The Ambassador emphasized that NGOs in every democratic society have the right to criticize government, and the obligation to do so responsibly. She told the activists that we remain concerned about the case and have urged the government to guarantee their physical safety, carry out a transparent investigation and, if warranted, provide them a fair and speedy trial. At the activists' request, we also promised to establish contact with their lawyers. Ona noted that the government would soon learn of our meeting, and said no other diplomatic mission in Libreville had so far sought a similar opportunity to debrief the former detainees. At a January 20 reception celebrating Martin Luther King's birthday and the peaceful and democratic change of power in the United States, the Ambassador again emphasized the importance of citizen and NGO activism to a crowd that included senior government ministers and military officials.

Comment

¶10. (C) Marc Ona and his close associates are all-purpose social activists, with preoccupations that extend significantly beyond the pro-environment, anti-corruption work for which they receive significant external funding. They do not emphasize, but also do not conceal, the breadth of their activities in dialogue with foreign diplomats and other international representatives. Their assertion that the government has concocted a case against them is nevertheless credible. Unless and until the government comes forward with more persuasive evidence, we will continue to view this as a case of unjustified political prosecution and respond appropriately. End Comment.
REDDICK